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**Title:** A Veterans Day Tribute: Leslie Groves, a lifetime of construction and service

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LANL Today Eds: Link to Veterans' Day poster, please.

Box:  original illustrated poster created in honor of Veterans Day. Since its inception in 1943, the Lab has had an enduring partnership with the military.

### **A Veterans Day Tribute: Leslie Groves, a lifetime of construction and service**

Known for his significant contributions to and management of the Manhattan Project, it's only appropriate to remember Leslie Groves's dedication and contributions to the military on Veterans Day.

From his early Army years at West Point to his leadership of the secret laboratory in Los Alamos, Groves is the paradigm of a lifetime of extraordinary military service.

"I believe that Los Alamos exists because of Groves," said Lab Historian Roger Meade. "He hired Directors [J. Robert] Oppenheimer, who created and built the wartime Lab, and hired [Norris] Bradbury, who kept the Lab relevant after the end of the war and laid the foundation for its permanence."

### **Early military influence**

Military leadership seemed to be in Groves's blood and his destiny. In 1896, the year that Groves was born, his father transitioned from a full-time Presbyterian pastor to a military chaplain. Growing up on military installations and witnessing his father's dedication to serve were influential on Groves's education and professional decisions.

In Groves's book *Now It Can Be Told* (1962), Groves reflected on how he "came to know many of the old soldiers and scouts who had devoted their active lives to winning the West," whose stories left him "somewhat dismayed, wondering what was left for me to do now that the West was won." However, after experiencing World War I, and later witnessing the advent of World War II, Groves's life trajectory became clear.

### **Starting a military career**

While at the U.S. military academy West Point, his education was fast-tracked through a War Emergency Course upon the U.S. entry into World War I. He later graduated from the Army Engineer School, Command and General Staff School, and Army War College.

After serving on several military bases at home and abroad, Groves joined the War Department General Staff in Washington, D.C., to direct the location and construction of a site to train and mobilize Army personnel. He then led the construction of the world's largest office building at the time: the headquarters for the U.S. Department of Defense and a symbol of the military, what would come to be known as the Pentagon. Construction of the Pentagon began in 1941 and was completed in 1943. These large planning and construction projects helped prepare him for what would be the biggest project of his life.

### **Building and leading the Manhattan Project**

The Manhattan Project had begun in August 1942, but many of those involved found the progress of the project too slow and inefficient for such an urgent objective—the development and production of the world's first atomic bomb. The project needed someone who would shepherd its construction and advancement more aggressively, and the name that came up in discussions was Leslie Groves.

The pace that Groves set for the construction of the Los Alamos wartime lab was ambitious indeed, and this efficiency earned him the reputation of having “no time for the subtleties of diplomacy... By temperament and training, he was an authoritarian,” according to *American Prometheus*, which also noted that Groves’s aide Col. Kenneth D. Nichols had said, “He has the guts to make timely, difficult decisions ... I hated his guts and so did everybody else, but we had our form of understanding.”

### **Choosing Oppie and Los Alamos**

Groves needed a scientist who had a breadth of physics knowledge, rather than a specialization, to oversee the scientific administration of the Laboratory. Groves chose physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer against the opposition of the Manhattan Engineer District (MED) and Military Policy Commission, who expressed numerous concerns over Oppenheimer's past associations with friends and family members who had ties to the communist party. Additionally, as Groves states in his book, "Oppenheimer had two major disadvantages—he had had almost no administrative experience of any kind, and [he was not a Nobel Prize winner](#)."

Groves was certain of his choice, though, and issued the following letter: "In accordance with my verbal directions ... it is desired that clearance be issued for the employment of Julius Robert Oppenheimer without delay, irrespective of the information which you have concerning Mr. Oppenheimer. He is absolutely essential to the project."

Groves’s instincts were correct. Oppenheimer’s role became one of many decisions Groves made that proved instrumental to the Manhattan Project’s success. Another was choosing the site of Los Alamos.

Groves drew on his experience in construction and site preparation to make the critical decision of where the secret scientific laboratory, called Project Y, would be located. After discussions with Oppenheimer, Groves sought a location that was isolated enough for scientists to collaborate freely but had the potential for the construction of critical research and development facilities. With agreement from the search committee, Groves settled on a rural area in the northern New Mexico mountains, inhabited by a few homesteaders and [a boys’ boarding school](#).

### **Deploying the atomic bomb**

Another of Groves’s critical decisions came after the bomb had been successfully developed. Groves consulted members of the U.S. administration and administrators of the Manhattan Project to discuss the where, when, and why of locations to drop the bomb to end the war. Groves never hesitated in his objective, and recalled the importance of this work, stating in his book, “In such a climate, no one who held a position of responsibility in the Manhattan Project could doubt that we were trying to perfect a weapon that, however repugnant it might be to us as human beings, could nonetheless save untold numbers of American lives.”

Five sites were chosen within Japan, and those sites would be bombed consecutively until a declaration of peace could be made. “I had set as the governing factor that the targets chosen should be places the bombing of which would most adversely affect the will of the Japanese people to continue the war,” Groves wrote in his book. “Beyond that, they should be military in nature.” Once Nagasaki, the second site on the list, had been bombed on August 9, 1945, the U.S. military began preparations for a third site (see Groves’s memo below). Fortunately, the emperor of Japan agreed to a peace treaty before the third bomb could be delivered.

With the official end of World War II on September 2, 1945, Groves received awards and commendations, including the Distinguished Service Medal, Commander of the Order of the Crown from Belgium, and Companion of the Order of the Bath from Britain, among numerous others. These awards recognized Groves's accomplishments and cemented the military allied relationship between the United States and other countries.

**After the Manhattan Project**

Groves relinquished responsibility for the MED and Los Alamos in 1947—the same year that Veterans Day was first recognized.

Groves pursued a civilian career, but maintained ties with the military. He was promoted in retirement to Lieutenant General and served as president of the West Point alumni organization, among other distinctions.

Groves died from heart disease at the age of 73 and is interred at Arlington National Cemetery.



General Leslie Groves was the leader of the Manhattan Project, which was the U.S. government's top secret effort to build atomic weapons during World War II. Among other decisions, Groves helped select Los Alamos as the site for the clandestine lab and hired physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer as Lab Director.



General Leslie Groves chose the Japanese targets for the Los Alamos-created atomic weapons. Little Boy was released above Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 and Fat Man was released above Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.



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WAR DEPARTMENT  
WASHINGTON

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E.O. 11652, Sec. 3(E) and 5(D) or (E)  
AND 730039  
By ER NARS, Date 6/4/79

10 August 1945.

MEMORANDUM TO: Chief of Staff.

The next bomb of the implosion type had been scheduled to be ready for delivery on the target on the first good weather after 24 August 1945. We have gained 4 days in manufacture and expect to ship from New Mexico on 12 or 13 August the final components. Providing there are no unforeseen difficulties in manufacture, in transportation to the theatre or after arrival in the theatre, the bomb should be ready for delivery on the first suitable weather after 17 or 18 August.

*L. R. Groves*

L. R. GROVES,  
Major General, USA.



*It is not to be released on Japan without express authority from the President.*

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caption: This memo from General Leslie Groves to the chief of staff details the release of a third weapon, following the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, Japan surrendered unconditionally and no other bombs were deployed.



General Leslie Groves's badge photo from the Manhattan Project-era lab in Los Alamos. His [badge photo](#), and others, are part of the collections of the Lab's National Security Research Center.



General Leslie Groves states in his book that “Oppenheimer had told me that he wanted to leave [the Los Alamos Lab] as soon as he could, and we discussed a possible successor for him ... After much thought and considerable discussion with Oppenheimer and others I asked Dr. Norris Bradbury (pictured here talking with Groves) to take the position. Bradbury had ... played an important part in the development of the gun-type bomb. Also, he was a Navy reserve officer, a circumstance I thought would help him in maintaining smooth relations between the civilian scientific staff and the military administrative officers.”



(seated, left) Second Lab Director Norris Bradbury; General Leslie R. Groves; and Eric Jette, division leader for Chemistry and Metallurgy.





Known as an unlikely pair, J. Robert Oppenheimer and General Leslie Groves formed a successful partnership based on mutual respect. The two stand in perpetual conversation in this memorial located in downtown Los Alamos.